

All that Sparkles

The Texan Quartet #2

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my critique group both past and present; Anna, Juanita, Leonie, Lorraine, Susy and Teena. Your insightful feedback, enthusiastic encouragement and general comradery are a huge support to me and I look forward to our meetings each month.

Chapter 1

“Imogen, *darling*, I need you to check through the collection for fashion week.”

Imogen Fontaine suppressed a groan. She did *not* need this now. Not when she was already running late. The day was turning in to one big did-not-finish and Libby was meeting her to try on her wedding dress in a few short hours.

She turned, pasting a smile on her face. “Why don’t you do it, Jacques? Just this once?”

She didn’t dislike many people, but Jacques was the top of the list of those she did. He had a chip on his shoulder the size of Mount Rushmore. It wasn’t Imogen’s fault her father was determined she should take over the company one day.

Jacques shook his head, tutting. “I don’t have that kind of authority. Only a Fontaine can sign off on the line, and your father is away on business.”

It was days like this she wished her father would trust someone else enough to give them approval rights, but he didn’t think anyone knew his way of doing things like Imogen did.

He was wrong. Jacques was probably a worse stickler for quality than Imogen was, and he lived and breathed Tour de Force just as much as Remy Fontaine, whereas Imogen didn’t always agree with some of her father’s designs.

Imogen sighed. “Where is it?”

“Where it always is, *darling*. In the finishing hall.”

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Imogen accompanied him downstairs to the big ballroom-sized space where all completed garments ended up. She walked through the door and pushed down her anger. All the outfits were enclosed in their garment bags, lined up one after the other on special hooks against the wall. It would take her ages to take everything out of the bags, check it all and put it back in – and Jacques knew it.

“How about you unzip the outfits over there?” she said.

“Oh *darling*, I would *love* to, but I must leave early today to watch my daughter’s school ballet concert. Your father has already approved it. Toodles.” With a little wave and a smirk, he left the room.

Imogen wanted to swear, but it would do no good. Instead she walked over to the first garment in the line, unzipped the bag and started her checks.

It was several hours before she was finished and she hurried back upstairs to her office, doing her best to avoid running into anyone else. It was almost the end of the day so most people were in go-home mode anyway, but Imogen didn’t want to take the chance. She closed the door behind her and let out a deep breath. She was tired. Tired of snide remarks from people like Jacques and tired of the haute couture outfits her father loved. She wanted to design something real, something stylish, but a little bit different, that the person on the street could afford. It was one of the reasons she’d been so thrilled when Libby had asked her to design her wedding dress.

The thought of Libby’s dress spurred Imogen into action. She had to get home to finish the beading.

She grabbed her purse, shut down her computer and headed home.

Imogen parked next to her cottage and got out of the car. Breathing deeply, she inhaled the fragrance of the nearby magnolia blooms and stretched to release some of her tension. She glanced down the path which led to her secret garden. She didn’t have time to go to her tree house, to remember that

summer with Christian, but just the thought of it made her smile, made her relax. She headed inside.

In no time at all she found herself sewing the final bead onto the wedding dress and tying off the thread, snipping it close to the knot. She straightened out the gown and got to her feet, slipping the dress onto its hanger, and stood back to get a good look.

It was gorgeous.

The line would subtly define Libby's small curves and float down to her ankles, turning her into a princess for the day.

She hoped Libby still liked it.

Nerves skittered over her skin. She didn't normally design wedding dresses, had never done so in fact, but when Libby had described the type of dress she wanted, Imogen had unconsciously sketched it on the paper in front of her. Libby had been blown away by the drawing and Imogen had been so caught up in her friend's excitement that she'd agreed to make it before she'd considered the consequences.

But really, there was no way she could have refused. When her closest friend, Piper, had introduced her to Libby a few months earlier, they'd become fast friends.

The clock on the wall caught her attention. She didn't have time to sit contemplating. She jumped to her feet, pressed the dress and enclosed it in a garment bag before dashing into the kitchen to get the champagne she'd left chilling.

As she turned back toward her sewing room, there was a knock on her kitchen door and her father walked in. She groaned inwardly. He was supposed to be in LA.

"*Ma bichette*, I am home." He kissed both of her cheeks.

It was one disadvantage of living at the guesthouse of Chateau Fontaine: her father never called before walking over. She rubbed her arms. She didn't want him there when Libby and Piper arrived. "Hi, Papa. I didn't think you were going to be back until tomorrow."

"I missed you too much," he said. "Now, what are you doing with champagne? Have you friends around?"

Imogen hesitated. "Libby's coming for a dress fitting."

"Ah, the mysterious wedding dress you will not show me. I must examine it if it is to have the Tour de Force name on it."

His French accent was more pronounced than usual: a sign he wanted to persuade her.

“Papa, I wasn’t going to put Tour de Force on it. It’s a favor for a friend.”

“Nonsense! This friend is marrying the most famous rock star in the world. She must have an outfit worthy of her.”

Imogen thought frantically about how to distract him but he moved purposefully toward her sewing room.

“Ah, there it is!” He stalked over to the garment bag and unzipped it. “Let’s have a look.”

“It’s what Libby wanted,” Imogen said as he removed the bag to reveal the outfit.

Silence.

Remy Fontaine, founder of Tour de Force, one of the most prestigious clothing brands in the world, examined the dress Imogen had designed and made.

Imogen clasped her hands tightly in front of herself. When the silence became too much to bear, she asked, “What do you think?”

He made a noise, a hum, and stroked his thumb over his lip. Finally he said, “It has potential.” He scrunched up a section on the side. “If we pin this here, put a red bow there, add some different colored beading and mess up the hem a bit, we could call it a Tour de Force.”

Imogen let out an exasperated squeak and rushed over to take her father’s hand off the dress, before trying to smooth out the wrinkles. “Libby doesn’t want color.”

“Nonsense. Every woman who wants a Tour de Force wants color.”

Before Imogen could reiterate that Libby didn’t want a Tour de Force dress, the gate intercom buzzed. Her friends had arrived.

“Wait here.” She hurried to press the gate release and waited by the front door, hoping her father wouldn’t touch the dress again.

Piper and Libby drove up and got out of their cars. Imogen forced a smile. “Hi! Come in.”

“I can’t wait to see the dress,” Libby said as she hugged Imogen.

“Come through,” Imogen said and rushed back to her sewing room, where her father was still examining the garment.

Libby noticed Imogen’s father first. “Mr. Fontaine, I’m sorry. Are we disturbing something?”

“No. He wanted to view your dress,” Imogen said before her father could reply, and then remembered Remy had unzipped the garment bag, which meant Libby and Piper could see it too.

Libby gasped and her hands went to her mouth.

Imogen cringed. The dress was crinkled now and all she could see was what her father did: plain and boring.

“It’s perfect,” Libby breathed. She hurried over and reached out a hand to the dress and then paused and turned to Imogen. “Can I touch it?”

Imogen nodded.

Reverently Libby touched the beading and ran her hand down the smooth satin. “It’s just what I imagined.” She turned back to Imogen, tears in her eyes. “Thank you.” She hugged her tightly again and all Imogen’s nerves melted away. It didn’t matter what her father thought of the dress; what mattered was Libby loved it.

“Are you sure you don’t want a little color?” her father asked, seemingly intrigued.

“No. It’s perfect.”

He huffed out a breath. “I’ll leave you girls to it,” he said and walked out of the sewing room.

Imogen breathed a sigh of relief.

“You have to try it on,” Piper said, moving over to them now Remy had left the room.

“Can I?” Libby asked Imogen.

“Of course. That’s what you’re here for.” Imogen unzipped the gown while Libby undressed to her underwear and then together she and Piper helped her into the dress.

“Close your eyes,” Piper ordered as she zipped up the dress. “Imogen, pass the bag over there.”

Imogen fetched the bag, which contained a shoebox. Piper opened the box and pulled out the perfect pair of gorgeous white strappy high heels. Imogen helped Libby balance while Piper put the shoes on her feet and then together they led her to

the full-length mirror hung behind the door.

Imogen fussed around making sure the dress sat perfectly and then stood back.

“Open your eyes,” Piper said.

Slowly Libby opened her eyes and they widened as she viewed her reflection. “Oh.” She put a hand up to her mouth as if she couldn’t believe what she saw.

Imogen felt a surge of pride. The dress *was* perfect for Libby; it didn’t need any of the extra fussiness her father wanted.

“You look beautiful,” Piper said with a hitch in her voice. Imogen’s eyes watered as well. She’d only known Libby for a few months but it didn’t matter. This was her friend in the dress she was going to wear to marry the man she loved. Imogen grabbed the box of tissues from her table and passed them around.

Piper dabbed her eyes and cleared her throat. “How do you want to do your hair?” she asked and went to stand behind Libby, whose straight brown hair was falling loose down her back.

“I’m hopeless with hairstyles.” She examined herself. “Maybe up?”

“Definitely,” Imogen said, standing next to Piper and taking a handful of Libby’s hair, piling it on top of her head. “If you pin it up loosely, so it’s a bit messy but exposes your neck, you can then wear dangling earrings, which will balance the dress perfectly.” She handed Piper some sample earrings then started pinning the hair. “Those are an example,” she said. “So if you hate them it’s fine.” She grinned at Libby in the mirror.

Imogen had spent enough time helping out backstage at fashion shows, so she had Libby’s hair in an artfully messy arrangement in about a minute.

She stepped back. “What do you think?”

Libby was silent for long enough for Imogen to start to worry. Then she said, “You need to take a picture. This is exactly what I want.”

Imogen let out a breath as Piper laughed and retrieved her phone from her bag. “Hold still.”

Piper took a few photos of Libby and then of the three of

them. Imogen grinned at their differences. Libby was tall and slim with that long chocolate hair; Piper was average height and her honey-blond hair was short and stylish; and then there was Imogen. She'd always been short, petite, her father said, and her black hair was cropped into a pixie cut.

She turned and helped Libby out of her dress and then opened the bottle of champagne she had placed on her table. "Here's to Libby and Adrian."

They drank the toast and then Libby said, "I'm so lucky to have you both. I can't believe I met the man of my dreams, reconnected with Piper and met you, Imogen. I'm so happy."

The man of her dreams. Christian's face immediately appeared in Imogen's mind and she blinked it away. She beamed. *She* was the lucky one, finally meeting Piper's Australian friend. "You deserve to be. Has Kate chosen her flower-girl dress yet?"

Libby exchanged a glance with Piper. "When we showed her the dresses you designed for us, she said she wanted you to design her something."

"Really?" The sketches she'd made for Libby and Piper had just been doodles. She was amazed that her friends had seen their potential.

"You don't have to," Libby said in a rush.

"No, I'd love to," Imogen assured her. "I'm just surprised. Bridal clothing isn't my specialty."

"You have a way of listening to what people want and making it a reality," Piper told her.

It was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to her. "Do you have plans tomorrow?" Imogen asked. "We could have a girls' day with Kate."

"She'd love that," Libby said. "Let me call and ask her."

Libby called Kate and after she explained Imogen and Piper could both hear the squeal of delight from the other end of the phone.

"I think that's a yes," Imogen said.

Piper chuckled and put down her champagne glass. "Have you got anything to eat? The champagne has gone right to my head."

"Sure."

Libby hung up the phone and Imogen said, "Do you want

to stay for dinner?”

She shook her head. “Adrian’s got a thing this evening. I need to head home to look after Kate.”

“No problem. We’ll pick you two up tomorrow at nine.”

“Sounds great.”

Imogen and Piper walked Libby to the door and waved goodbye. Then they returned to the kitchen where Imogen searched for something to feed Piper. The one thing she always had was crackers and cheese. It was a start.

Placing the collection of nibbles on the table, she asked, “Libby doesn’t want a hens’ night, does she?”

“No. She doesn’t see much point to the traditional go out and get drunk.”

“What about a hens’ day?” Imogen suggested, the idea she’d had beginning to grow. “I’ll check if Papa’s limo is free and we can do the full pamper package: massage, spa, nails, hair. I’ll talk to Kate about her dress and we can have lunch in town.”

Piper grinned. “Sounds fantastic.”

Imogen grabbed her phone out of her bag and started making calls. She wanted to make her friend’s day as special as possible.

When the limo picked Libby and Kate up the next morning, the little girl nearly pulled Libby over in her excitement. The chauffeur opened the door and she bounded in. “Hi Piper. Hi Imogen! This is so exciting! Where are we going? What are we doing?”

Imogen laughed. “You’ll find out when we get there.”

Outside the car, Adrian gave Libby a goodbye kiss. Imogen felt a twinge of envy as they reluctantly parted. What would it be like to have that kind of love?

Imogen greeted Libby as she climbed into the car and waved to Adrian. He was dressed casually today, his black cargo shorts and T-shirt sitting loose on his tall, rangy frame and his short black hair mussed stylishly.

“Y’all have a great day and take care of my girls.”

“Will do,” Piper called and then the chauffeur closed the door leaving the four of them in the back seat of the limo.

Imogen pressed play on the stereo and some quiet jazz played in the background. Then she got out her sketchbook and turned to Kate. "What kind of dress do you want, Kate?"

Her eyes widened. "I don't know. Something pretty." She clasped her hands together.

Imogen began with the easiest decision. "Short or long?"

"Short. Kind of knee length."

The speed with which Kate replied made Imogen think she had a good idea of what she wanted.

"Long sleeves, short sleeves, straps or nothing?"

"Short sleeves or maybe straps."

Imogen asked more questions, taking notes, and then started sketching. By the time they arrived at the spa, she had a rough draft. She showed it to Kate.

Kate was quiet for a long moment and then asked, "Could you maybe make the skirt bigger?"

Imogen smiled and made some adjustments. "Like this?"

Kate nodded. "And maybe the sleeves smaller?"

Imogen took in the sleeves.

"Perfect," Kate breathed. "Can you really make it?"

"Sure. Are you going to have the same fabric as Piper?"

Kate turned to Libby.

"If you want, Kate. You can choose the color and fabric."

"I'd love to have the same as Piper." Kate beamed.

"Easy. I'll do a toile next week and you can decide if you like it."

"A what?"

Imogen grinned. "A toile is a sample of the dress in a cheap fabric to make sure the pattern is right before doing the real thing."

"Great!" Kate said. "You're the best." She threw her arms around Imogen.

Surprised, Imogen hugged the girl back. Her heart tugged at the enthusiasm and affection of Kate. She wanted to have children, a whole tribe of them, but she'd never met a guy she wanted to have them with.

The men she met were more interested in her money than in her.

Except Christian. That summer when she was fifteen had

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been one of the best times of her life. He was often in her thoughts. If only he hadn't disappeared without a trace.

"Earth to Imogen!"

Piper's voice shook her back into the present. The others were waiting for her on the pavement. Quickly she got out, thanked their driver and smiled at the others. "Let's go get pampered!"

A week later Imogen was putting the finishing touches on Piper's bridesmaid dress when Libby called.

"Are you free for dinner tonight?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Our place at seven. Adrian and George's friend from school has arrived back from overseas and needs to be filled in on the wedding plans. He's going to be the usher."

George was Adrian's manager and best man. "So it's going to be a wedding review?"

"Yeah."

"I'll bring Piper's and Kate's dresses around."

"That'd be great. See you then."

By the end of the day she was running late. This time it had been Lacey, one of the seamstresses, who needed a hand completing a garment for an awards show. It needed to be couriered overnight, so it had to be finished.

Imogen could never refuse the frequent requests for help. She had spent almost every school break at the business since she was fifteen, and because she loved it, she'd made sure she learned about every stage of the clothing process; from design, to sample-making, to manufacture, to selling. Besides if it were for the good of the company, her father would want her to do it.

When Imogen finished the dress, she checked the time, cursed in her head and then rushed out to the parking lot to her little yellow sports car.

Houston traffic was always hell at rush hour. She rang Libby to tell her she was running late.

When finally she arrived, Imogen was ready to explode. She'd tried to take a different route but a car had broken down, making it twice as bad as the original route. She took a minute to calm her breathing, saw that Piper's car was already in the drive along with another couple of cars and then got out and took the garment bag from the back seat. At least she had something to offer tonight.

Kate opened the door and ushered her inside. "We waited for you," she said as she showed Imogen into the living area.

"Sorry I'm late," she said as she gravitated toward Libby and Piper with the garment bag over her shoulder. She laid it over the back of one of the empty chairs before she turned to greet Adrian, George and the friend she hadn't met yet.

He was facing away from her, dressed in jeans and a casual blue shirt.

Adrian smiled at Imogen and interrupted the conversation. "Chris, you haven't met Imogen yet."

Chris turned as Adrian said, "Chris Barker, this is Imogen Fontaine."

Imogen stared at the face of the man who turned around. The blue eyes and the neat brown hair were the same as those of the teenaged guy she'd known.

The guy who had disappeared after the most perfect few weeks of summer.

The guy she'd imagined meeting again in a million different ways.

Her heart stuttered and her breath caught.

After all this time.

It was Christian.

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