

JANICE THOMPSON



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To Debbie Maddox, costume designer extraordinaire! For the hundreds of hours you've spent designing, pinning, tucking, altering, and sewing costumes so that I could see my characters come to life on the stage—thank you! The only "stitches" you've given me over the years are the ones in my side from all the laughter! Thanks so much for your encouragement with this book, girl.

And to my mama, the best seamstress I know!

In memory of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The chapter titles in this fun-loving tale are all Fred and/or Ginger movies or songs.



The Sky's the Limit

I'm a material girl—want to see my fabric collection?

Author unknown

hen a seamstress uses the phrase "coming out of the closet," it takes on a whole new meaning. I still remember the day I spilled the beans to my grandmother, Mimi Carmen, that I wanted to be a designer. She took it pretty well. Mama, not so much. Knowing my mother, she was probably worried about my job security.

I understood her concerns. In fact, that's why I decided not to share my aspirations with my boss at the dress shop where I worked. It was one thing for a girl who specialized in alterations to tell her family that she was a closet wedding dress designer. It was another thing altogether for her to come clean with an emotionally charged man like Demetri Markowitz, one who held her career in the palm of his slick. haute couture-filled hands

Nope. My eccentric boss wouldn't be hearing about my passion for A-line silhouettes and empire waistlines anytime soon, or the hours I spent sketching out designs in my head during my off-hours. Not if I could help it. My lips would remain as tightly zipped as the size 22 satin crème gown I'd just altered for a bride who insisted she could squeeze into a 16.

Mental note: Never argue with a bride-to-be who insists on nibbling on a fried vie while trying on her gown.

Still, sealed lips or not, a girl in my position couldn't take any chances. Not when her mama and grandmother were counting on her to provide a huge chunk of the family's income. And not when she had a boss like Demetri, who would gladly trade her in for a new "material girl"—his words, not mine—at the drop of a beaded bridal hat.

So, in the closet I would stay, pincushion firmly attached to my wrist and measuring tape in hand. Until the wee hours of the night, anyway. That's when you'd find me seated at Mimi Carmen's 1967 Singer sewing machine, eyes glazed over, stitching out what I hoped would be a brand-new life for myself.

Not that I had much time to design my own wedding gowns. As much as I wanted my own line of dresses, my day job consumed most of my energy. It also zapped my creativity, at least from eight to five. If not for the ongoing support of Bella Neeley, the island's most illustrious wedding coordinator, I probably would've given up by now. She knew my passion and fueled it in every shared conversation by offering encouraging tidbits. If only my own confidence level could be as high.

I contemplated my insecurities as I made the drive to Haute Couture Bridal, Galveston's finest wedding dress shop, on the hottest August morning I could remember in years. The heat caused my 2001 Ford Focus to sputter along. If I could afford to get rid of the rust-covered old thing, I would, but who would take it off my hands? No one in his right mind.

The goofy car gave me fits at nearly every stoplight along the way. When I finally reached the dress shop on the far north end of the Strand, I sighed with relief. So did the car. It hiccuped to a stop . . . literally.

After a quick glance in the chipped rearview mirror, I emerged from the car, ready to begin my day. I slammed the door shut and the side mirror fell off. Perfect. I picked it up, opened the door, and tossed it inside.

One of the shop owners happened by and pointed at my car. "Better get that fixed before you get a ticket."

"Yeah, I know."

She told me a story about her brother-in-law's 250-dollar ticket for a broken taillight, and I nodded politely.

The woman headed off to the confectionery just a few doors down, and I turned to face the now infamous Haute Couture Bridal. I drew in a deep breath, preparing to head inside and face whatever the day happened to bring, good or bad.

Please, God, let it be good.

From above, the store's sign caught my eye. Apparently a seagull had left behind some icky remains on it. Demetri would be beside himself, no doubt. He would see it as a blight on his business and call for someone to clean it right away. Hopefully that someone wouldn't be me. Grunt work usually went hand in hand with alterations, at least in his world.

I paused to look at the gowns in the front window, amazed at the professional display. To the right of the front door, two wedding gowns—one pure white silk and one satin crème—flanked a deep purple bridesmaid dress. In the window to the left of the door, Demetri's pride and joy—a multifeathered number—took the place of honor, nestled between two, in my opinion, outdated flower girl dresses. The crystals on the bodice shimmered as a carefully placed light in the floor of the window, angled just so, hit it. Ah, the joy of showcasing. Demetri excelled at it. Not that he actually dressed the windows, of course. Lydia and Corinne, two of our salesclerks, usually took care of that. He'd taken to calling them the Dynamic Duo because of their high energy level.

Before walking inside, I happened to glance down and noticed that the hem of the satin crème needed to be adjusted. Should I mention it or let it go? To mention it would mean more work on my end. Still, as I stared through the crystalclean glass at the beautifully presented gowns, I knew that I must. My conscience wouldn't allow me to let it go. No designer in her right mind would allow such a travesty.

I entered the store to find my high-strung boss in one of his moods. In typical flamboyant style, the impeccably dressed, overly groomed Demetri waved his manicured hands in the air to get my attention. "Gabi, you're late, and zis is not a good day to raise my blood pressure!" Angst always seemed to exaggerate his Russian accent, and this morning offered no exception to that rule.

"But I'm not late." I glanced at my watch just to be sure. Yep. Ten till eight. "I'm not supposed to be in until eight o'clock, remember?" I slid my purse off my shoulder and shifted it to the other hand.

"On a normal day." Creases formed between Demetri's carefully sculpted brows, and a muscle flicked at his jaw. "But zis is not a normal day. Zis is a Nicolette Cavanaugh day."

"Ah." Our latest diva bride-to-be had already left her mark on more than one occasion, so I understood his concerns. Mostly. "What time is she arriving?"

"Nine o'clock. And her dress *haz* to be ready." His accent thickened in perfect timing with the narrowing of his eyes.

"Oh, it is. I—"

"Vhen a designer puts as much time and effort into a piece as I did veeth Nicolette's couture gown, he expects it to be perfect." Demetri paused to check his appearance in a nearby mirror and brushed an invisible piece of fuzz off the lapel of his expensive suit jacket. He straightened his dark red tie and resituated the corresponding handkerchief in his pocket, shaping it to pointed perfection.

"Well, ves, but—"

He turned to face me. "The Fab Five vorked like a velloiled machine to follow my pattern to a T, and zay executed it beautifully. Now we have to make sure zee final touches are equally as fine."

I tried not to groan as he mentioned the Fab Five—the well-paid seamstresses who worked in his design studio behind the shop. Despite my attempts to become the sixth player on this illustrious dream team, Demetri wouldn't hear of it. To him, I would always be just the material girl, a position even lower than that of salesclerk.

He paused to glance in the mirror once again and touched up the already perfect graying hair at his temples, then brushed the shoulders of his Italian suit jacket. "Under my guidance, zay crafted a magnificent gown—one vorthy of a write-up in *Texas Bride* magazine. And zay did it all in less zan four yeeks."

"Yes. They're very good at what they do." Though it pained me to admit it, the five women—handpicked from five countries around the globe—were among the best in the business. I had nothing against them. Well, nothing personal, anyway. Still, I couldn't help but feel like Cinderella, slaving away in my tiny closet—er, alterations room—while the evil stepsisters got all the glory in their spacious, state-of-the art studio.

Deep breath, Gabi. Deep breath.

"I'm assuming zee alterations have been made?" Turning his attention away from the mirror, Demetri faced me head-on.

"Yes, of course, Demetri. I—"

"Nicolette vill be in a mood, no doubt. She's always cranky at zis time of day. I'm sure you remember her last visit. It took two days and four Xanax to get over zat one." He rambled on about people and their volatile emotional states, to which I could only offer a nod.

"Don't worry about Nicolette." I flashed what I hoped was a confident smile. "I've done everything she asked for."

My boss gave me a dubious look. "You raised zee vaist-line?"

"Three-quarters of an inch." Though I had to wonder why the Fab Five made the bodice too long to begin with.

"Let out zee bustline?" Demetri crossed his arms at his chest, as if talking about a woman's chest size made him uncomfortable.

"Two and a half inches." I still couldn't figure out why the bride had decided to get breast implants after being fitted for her wedding gown, but that wasn't really my business, I supposed. I'd used every available bit of excess fabric in the seam to accommodate her perky new DDs, and I'd done it all without destroying the shape of the gown. Houdini himself couldn't have worked such magic.

"Hmm." Demetri followed me into my alterations closet at the back of the shop. He reached for a lint roller and ran it across his shoulders, then gave me a stern look. "Veethout destroying zee pleats?"

Okay, now he had crossed a line. Surely my boss knew me well enough to know the quality of my work. Had I ever destroyed anything?

"Demetri, I've done all that you asked and I did a fine job. Nicolette will be thrilled and so will you. As always." I emphasized the last two words. At this point I didn't trust myself to speak further, so I clammed up, ready to be done with this.

"Still, I—" Thank goodness he didn't have a chance to finish his thoughts. Kitty, our head salesclerk, caught him with a comment about a new shipment that had just arrived. He put the lint roller down and headed off to talk to her. I gave Kitty a grateful smile and settled into my private domain. I would have to tell Demetri about the uneven hem in the front window later, after he had calmed down.

Like that would ever happen.

Around 8:15 Kitty came into my alterations room. I gazed up at the fifty-something beauty, taking in the glistening ruby-red lips with their fine tattooed liner, the nicely executed eye makeup, and the shimmering rosy cheeks on top of pancaked skin. Sheer perfection. Exactly the sort of woman the impeccable Demetri depended on as the "front face" of his store. I'd never seen a hair out of place on Kitty's head. In fact,

I secretly wondered if she wore a hairpiece but had never voiced the thought aloud.

In other words, she was the polar opposite of me. No matter how hard I worked to get my long black strands to cooperate, they refused to play nicely. And although I considered myself to have a steady hand in the alterations room, my makeup job often left something to be desired. Not that I didn't give it the old college try. I wouldn't dare show up at work without making an attempt at looking professional. I worked for nearly an hour every morning to add color to my otherwise blank pallet.

Still, looking at Kitty's practically-perfect-in-every-way appearance reminded me of my every flaw. Oh well. What I lacked in the way of physical perfection, I made up for in skill at the sewing machine. What did it matter anyway, when Demetri kept me hidden away from the crowd?

Kitty let out a whistle when she saw Nicolette's gown. She stepped toward the dress form and a smile curved her mouth. "Gabi, this is perfect." She ran her perfectly polished fingertip across the delicate Austrian crystals I'd applied to the bodice. "You did an amazing job. I can't even tell that you let the gown out. Amazing."

I breathed a sigh of relief as Kitty continued to stare at Nicolette's dress in rapt silence. Thank God someone in the store appreciated my work.

"Thank you. I like the way it turned out. Hope Nicolette does too."

"She's crazy if she doesn't."

"It still boggles my mind that she had cosmetic surgery so close to her big day." I did my best not to roll my eyes as I thought about it. Who did that?

"From what I read on her Facebook page, she told everyone she was out of the country on an expensive European vacation." Kitty glanced toward the door and then nudged it shut with her foot, pulled up a chair, and took a seat. Leaning my way, she whispered the rest. "Nicolette even posted pictures of the Italian countryside as proof of her trip. But I followed the link and it led to a stock photo site online." She chuckled.

"Crazy." Who went to such lengths to hide the truth? Oh, wait. I did. At least when it came to my dress designs.

Kitty's brows arched. "Obviously she didn't want anyone to know about the . . . well, the surgery."

"Like going from a barely B cup to a DD wouldn't be noticeable?"

"I know, I know." Kitty giggled. "Pretty shocking difference, to my way of thinking, but I'm sure her daddy pulled out his credit card and covered the tab."

"Must be nice." Well, not to have breast implants, but to have a father who cared enough to stick around and pay for things for his daughter. What would that feel like?

Focus, Gabi. Focus.

Kitty gave the closed door another quick glance as if expecting Demetri to materialize on the other side. "Well, here's the good news," she said, her gaze now shifting back to the dress. "Nicolette is gonna look like a million bucks on her big day. That's really all that matters."

"I hope you're right." I didn't mention that I would have gone with a completely different design for the overly curvaceous thirty-something debutante. To my way of thinking, Nicolette needed something more formal. Less Hollywood party girl—like. I felt sure the ladies at the local Junior League would agree.

"Anyway, I just wanted to pop in to remind you that Nicolette's not the only special guest today. I've already prepped Lydia and Corinne. We've got that reporter coming from *Texas Bride*, so everyone needs to be on their game."

"Reporter?" Demetri had mentioned something about a magazine, hadn't he? But . . . today?

Kitty rose and smoothed her skirt. "Yeah, he's coming this morning at 9:15 for an interview. Not sure if he's bringing a photographer with him, but be prepared just in case."

"Oh, wow. Well, Demetri's got to love the free promotion." I did my best not to let the sarcasm in my voice ring through.

"Actually, the article is specifically about Nicolette's gown, which is why he's so keen on getting it finished before the reporter gets here. It's going to be the star of the show."

She pointed to the exquisite beaded dress, and I looked at it again with new eyes. If I'd known the gown was going to be photographed, I would have . . . Hmm. I wouldn't have changed a thing. Not a thing.

"The reporter's actually interviewing several designers across south Texas, each with a unique point of view, and we're thrilled to be on the list."

"I see." Must be nice, garnering that kind of acclaim for your work. I shoved aside the teensy-tiny bit of jealousy that threatened to erupt. "Well, I'm sure Demetri is pleased. I would be."

"He's nervous, I think." Her thinly plucked brows narrowed, and for the first time I noticed the color did not match her hair. Very suspicious. "But you know how he is. He tends to run on the excitable side. Even on a normal day, I mean."

To say the least. The man was more emotional than a

mother of the bride on her daughter's wedding day, and I'd met more than my fair share of those.

"The key here is to leave a lasting impression so that the reporter never forgets Haute Couture Bridal," Kitty said. "We want to be memorable, to stand out."

"Stand out, eh?" I couldn't help the giggle that rose up. "Well, I could do a song and dance number when the guy gets here. I was in musical theater, you know. And I worked at the Grand Opera Society." I didn't mention that I'd only worked behind the scenes, sewing costumes for the cast members. Instead, I gave what I hoped looked like a confident smile.

Kitty laughed. "No song and dance necessary, except the usual from Demetri. He'll be all politeness and smiles when the reporter is here."

In other words, he'd be faking it, as always. I bit back a sharp retort and smiled weakly. "Well, if you change your mind on the song and dance number, you know where to find me."

"Yes, I know where to find you." She glanced around my small janitor closet turned work space and sighed. "I keep telling Demetri you need more room. I'd go crazy cooped up in this little . . ."

"Closet." A hint of a sigh escaped as I finished the sentence for her.

My gaze shifted to a photo of Ginger Rogers I'd fastened to the wall. I read the words beneath for the thousandth time: The only way to enjoy anything in this life is to earn it first.

I pondered Ginger's journey—how she'd served as a prop in Fred Astaire's arms as he'd waltzed her across the dance floor in movie after movie. How the spotlight had shone brighter on him, even though she'd done all of the same dance steps. In heels. Backwards. With the edges of her lips curled up in a relaxed smile, seemingly at ease with her role.

In that moment, the weirdest image floated across my brain. I saw myself gliding across the floor with Demetri taking the lead, the tips of his polished Versaces tromping on my aching toes. His smile—forced, of course—was my cue to keep dancing. And so I did, while onlookers lavished him with praise for the exquisite routine and he pulled the red silk handkerchief from his beautifully tailored coat pocket and swiped glistening beads of sweat from his wrinkled brow.

"Gabi? You okay?"

I snapped back to attention and saw the look of concern on Kitty's face. "Oh, yeah. Just thinking."

Kitty said something about having to clean the bird droppings off the front sign, but I didn't hear most of it. I kept thinking about that image of Demetri waltzing me across the room and then posing for the cameras while I nursed my bruised toes . . . and pride.

Left alone in my little closet, I did my best to shake off my frustrations. If Ginger could hang on while she paid her dues, I could too. I would go on biding my time in this tiny janitor closet until a larger one came along. In the meantime, I would bend over backwards to make sure Nicolette Cavanaugh and her DDs were happy with my services, and I would do it all with a smile on my face . . . no matter how much my toes ached.